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The Reader at Play in “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” by Paul Auster

Linda Collinge-Germain

1 In the 1970s, the German theoreticians Jauss and Iser, in the wake of Barthes’ 1973 essay *Le Plaisir du texte*, forged the Reception Theory, or the *Theory of Aesthetic Response*, that established the reader as a full-fledged participant in the literary act of communication: literature is not a work written by an author, but a dialectical process between sender and receiver, between writer and reader: “all texts carry within themselves the supposition that for every text there is a reader”.[1] It was in this context that Michel Picard, in an interdisciplinary approach using existing research in the fields of psychology and anthropology, theorized the link between the literary reader and play and published his essay *La Lecture comme Jeu* in 1986.[2] His hypothesis is that reading is a specific form of play and like play has a function. He defines play as “an all-absorbing, uncertain activity, experienced as fictitious and yet subject to rules, oscillating between a childish pole (*paiia, jocus, playing*) and a more intellectual adult pole (*ludus, games*).”[3] He argues that “play has both a defensive and a constructive role for the Subject, allowing him to achieve a symbolic and integrating mastery.” Picard then proceeds to define “literary reading” as a type of play in which:

> the Subject freely accepts a double set of rules governing both the entry into illusion and the flow of the narrative; the reader is twice divided in two since one part of him [the *liseur*] remains (most often) seated and in the material world and the other part subdivides itself: on the side of believing reside fantasy, the unconscious, a sort of mildly hallucinating child [the *lu*] and on the side of distancing reside social reality, implementation of various skills and knowledge and a constantly evolving adult.

2 He concludes that “if the text allows it, the reader has an exceptional opportunity [which he can seize or not] to undertake *playful reality-testing*, fully exploiting the transitional space” defined by Donald Winnicott and expanding on Freud’s famous *Fort/Da* experience.

3 Though Paul Auster, in spite of his spending several years in France, most probably had no contact with Picard’s essay, his story “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story,” published on December 25, 1990 in *The New York Times*, seems, uncannily, nearly an illustration of the theory of “Reading as Play” as both in its form and its content the story problematizes the dialectics of participation and distancing inherent in the literary reading process defined by Picard. Whereas Delphine Letort considers Auster’s short story as an “examination of the process of *literary creation* [...] in a subtle game of encounters and exchanges between the writer/narrator and the storyteller/photographer Auggie Wren” (my translation and my emphasis),[4] this article examines the story in its staging of the process of *reception*, positing that Auster’s metafictional story proposes both an aesthetic experience for the reader and a commentary on that experience.[5]

Staging the storytelling/“storylistening” experience

4 “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” is about storytelling and foregrounds the storytelling experience. The characters in the short story are figures of fiction: “Paul” is the writer of the story we read and the eponymous Auggie is the storyteller, as the title suggests. Yet Paul is also, and perhaps foremost, a receiver (as we will see in the course of this article), first a spectator as he views Auggie’s photographs and then a listener as he listens to Auggie Wren’s Christmas story, a fact which has motivated me to coin the term “storylistening.” The indispensable presence of the receiver in the act of communication is perhaps what Wayne Wang and Paul Auster had in mind in the choice of frames and editing used in their film adaptation (entitled *Smoke*, 1995) of Auster’s short story. Using medium shots or shot/reverse shots during the numerous story-telling sequences, storyteller and listener are repeatedly contained in the same frame (Auggie/Paul, Cyrus/Rachid) or given equal status via juxtapositional editing of shot/reverse shots (Ruby/Auggie, Rachid/Paul, Paul/Rachid, Auggie/Paul).

5 In Auster’s story, the storytelling/listening act is further foregrounded as the story features not only the figures of fiction, but also the framed narrative (Auggie’s story) within the framing narrative (Paul’s story).[6] In the framing narrative, Paul, after having discovered several years earlier that Auggie Wren, who works at the cigar store Paul depends on for his favourite Dutch cigars, was also an avid amateur photographer, accepts to have a look at Auggie’s photographic works. Later, upon returning to the shop for cigars one day, he recounts the difficulty he has in coming up with a Christmas story for which he has been commissioned by *The New York Times*. Auggie offers to provide a Christmas story for Paul and in the framed narrative, Auggie tells Paul how he acquired the camera which is the source of his photographic oeuvre. He tells the story of his visit to Granny Ethel, an old blind woman with whom he unexpectedly spends Christmas day when returning the wallet belonging to her grandson. The day is spent improvising a Christmas dinner and telling “a hundred pretty stories” and ends with Auggie taking home a camera found in the bathroom as Granny Ethel dozes. The framing narrative then ends with Paul’s reaction to Auggie’s theft and finally to his story. The obvious link between framing and framed narratives is the camera but the content of a framed narrative may also be commentary on the framing narrative. We will see the dynamics created in the relationship between the two stories, especially what they have to do with the function of Art and more precisely with the posture of the reader, at play or not.

Soliciting reader participation

6 Picard's theory, borrowing from psychologist Donald Winnicott's concept of the "potential space" indispensable for the child at play constructing a sense of self,[7] is largely based on the reader's ability and willingness to move back and forth across the transitional space between the fantasy world and the real world. A fictional text which solicits reader participation is one which allows the reader to easily enter the fantasy world of fiction, to experience what Picard calls "literary illusion." A text which provides this opportunity for readers is one which uses devices such as linear plot, realistic characters, a recognizable setting in time and place and what Picard calls "embrayeurs de fiction" or "shifters into fiction."[8] The invitation into the world of fiction is what constitutes the "reading contract," defined by reception theorists as the fictional and virtual document drawn up by the author and signed by the reader in which an author proposes a text and a reader accepts to read it. The locus of this contract is the threshold of the text, either the paratext or the incipit. Auster's incipit to this story reads as follows:

> I heard this story from Auggie Wren. Since Auggie doesn't come off too well in it, at least not as well as he'd like to, he's asked me not to use his real name. Other than that, the whole business about the lost wallet and the blind woman and the Christmas dinner is just as he told it to me (578).

7 The conversational style of this incipit, including the colloquial "come off too well" and "the whole business" as well as the polysyndeton "the lost wallet *and* the blind woman *and* the Christmas dinner" (my emphasis), immediately establishes complicity between the narrator/protagonist and the reader by its informal nature. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the narrator is established by his assurance both that he has honored "Auggie's" request to remain anonymous and that he is faithfully rendering the story told to him. Finally the narrator's discourse offhandedly foreshadows three apparently unrelated events (a lost wallet, a blind woman, a Christmas dinner), an enticing appetizer for the reader on the verge of "devouring" the story. A nice, reliable guy with a good story to tell: all in all, perfect circumstances for the reader to pull out his virtual pen and sign the reading contract.

8 The use of shifters to the fictional world, fiction's equivalent to the fairy tale's "Once upon a time," is also an invitation to read. These shifters are markers to indicate to the reader that the story is about to begin, that he can adjust his posture accordingly, settle more firmly into his armchair, let go of the real world. Auster uses at least three in the short story, the first one—"I heard this story"—placed in the incipit cited above. The second appears after the paragraph in the iterative mode used to set the scene in the cigar store; thus the third paragraph of the story begins "But then one day several years ago" (578), "but then" indicating to the reader the shift from "reality" into the fictional past. Finally, when Auggie begins the framed narrative, his words are: "It was the summer of seventy-two" (580), indicating again, this time to both the reader and to Paul, that a story is about to begin.

9 The fiction writer's task is not only to invite the reader into the world of fiction, but also to permit the reader, once he has entered, to believe in its reality; the writer's task is to create the illusion of truth, a story to believe. This was Auster's avowed aim as he wrote "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story": "At that point [November 1990] there had

never been a story of fiction published in *The New York Times*, so I wanted it to sound like non-fiction."[9] He goes about this first of all by suggesting that the story is autobiographical. The first person narrator of the story, initially unnamed, is an author, like Paul Auster: he "heard *this* story" (578, my emphasis), Auggie has "stumbled across a review of one of [his] books" (578), and "[a] man from the *New York Times* called [him] and asked [him if he] would be willing to write a short story that would appear in the paper on Christmas morning" (580). The reader knows Auster's short story was published in *The New York Times* on December 25, 1990, suggesting to him that the story he is reading is the one commissioned, and the fact that he's reading the short story is "proof" of its veracity. Finally, on the last page of the story, the reader learns that the narrator's name is Paul and he is then convinced that the narrator is indeed Paul Auster, a believable character, even identifiable in the real world.

10 The narrator guarantees the authenticity of the story by assuring the reader by implication that it is not an invented one, but rather one he heard "from Auggie Wren." Further, "the whole business is *just as [Auggie] told it*" (578, my emphasis), the narrator faithfully recounting what he heard with the change in name as the exception that proves the rule. To faithfully recount is indeed precisely what Auggie asked the narrator to do after finishing the framed story of the Christmas dinner: " 'Just put it down the way I told it to you' " (583). Auggie himself says when preparing to tell the story to the narrator: " 'I'll tell you the best Christmas story you ever heard. And I guarantee that every word of it is true' " (580).

11 So the author creates the illusion of truth with these various guarantees of authenticity. We will see that this is not just a device to engage reader participation, but in fact that creating the illusion of truth and engaging reader participation are central themes of the short story. The question is how the reader will deal with this information: will the "illusion" be for him "referential" or "literary"?

12 Picard defines as "referential illusion" (88) the illusion that the linguistic signifier is its referent; the term has a negative connotation for Picard who sees referential illusion as resulting in a dead-end sterile interpretation which excludes any form of play (165).[10] The reader who, for example, considers that "Lyon" must only be considered as the city in which a story is set, identifiable on a map and perhaps the birthplace of the author, and not for instance the homophone of "lion," limits the play in the text. Literary illusion, on the other hand, is the result of a necessary "willing suspension of disbelief" (113) on the part of the reader.[11] Believing is an investment in the illusion, accepting as true what we know to be false. Though believing is potentially a source of denial and therefore pathological, Picard maintains that *pseudo*-believing, *pretending* to believe, adopting the position of the child who says, as Octave Mannoni puts it: "Je sais bien mais quand même..." (quoted in Picard, 1986, 115),[12] is not alienating but on the contrary necessary for the player to benefit from the play, and the benefits are directly proportional to the investment.[13]

13 By suspending his disbelief, the literary reader decides to enter the transitional space and take part in beneficial play. In his study of the function of play, Picard refers to the prototypical play described by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," what has become known as the *Fort/Da*: a young child, whose anxiety is provoked by the absence of his mother, throws a wooden reel across the room saying "*Fort*" (gone), then draws the reel back by pulling on the attached string saying "*Da*" (here). Picard observes that

the child transcends his anxiety by play that involves activity (he throws), symbolization (the reel represents his mother, throwing and retrieving represent her departure and return) and language (he speaks as he throws), precisely the components of what he calls “literary reading.”

14 In Auster’s short story, Auggie’s framed narrative proposes characters who “willingly suspend their disbelief,” becoming models of literary readers. Both Granny Ethel and Auggie are willing participants in a Christmas-day masquerade of family reunification, “ ‘a game [they] both decided to play’ ” when blind Granny Ethel opened her apartment door to Auggie, a complete stranger, imagining it might be her grandson Robert:[14]

> “I didn’t exactly say that I was her grandson. Not in so many words at least, but that was the implication. I wasn’t trying to trick her, though. It was like a game we’d both decided to play—without having to discuss the rules. I mean, that woman *knew* I wasn’t her grandson Robert. She was old and dotty, but she wasn’t so far gone that she couldn’t tell the difference between a stranger and her own flesh and blood. But it made her happy to pretend, and since I had nothing better to do anyway, I was happy to go along with her.” (582, the italics are interestingly Auster’s)

15 The terms used by Picard in his theorization are recognizable in Auggie’s story: Auggie admits they are playing a game by mutually consenting to suspend their disbelief; Granny *knew* that Auggie was not her grandson *but* it pleased her to read between the lines of Auggie’s discourse and *pretend*. She benefits from the game, transforming the potential anxiety of spending Christmas day without her family (after all Robert did not come) into happiness, just as Auggie was “ ‘happy to go along with her’,” having “ ‘nothing better to do’ ” (582) either, equally alone on Christmas day, “ ‘feeling a little sorry for himself’ ” sitting in his apartment alone that morning, “ ‘stuck with nothing to do’ ” (581). And it is in his passage from immobility, from “being stuck,” to entering the transitional space by actively proposing the game that the benefit will come, just as it did for Freud’s young anxiety-ridden child who actively threw the reel.

16 The game continues as Auster’s two characters spend the day conversing:

> “Every time she asked me a question about how I was, I would lie to her. I told her I’d found a good job working in a cigar store, I told her I was about to get married, I told her a hundred pretty stories, and she made like she believed every one of them. ‘That’s fine, Robert,’ she would say, nodding her head and smiling. ‘I always knew things would work out for you.’ ” (582)

17 The success of their day was based on investment in an illusion, on lies and believing in lies, and the benefits were proportional to the size of the investment: not only did Granny Ethel “ ‘[make] like she believed,’ ” but she pretended to believe *every one* of Auggie’s *hundred* “pretty stories”; *every* question she asked provoked a lie to believe. She repeatedly moved back and forth across the transitional space between the world of “make-believe” and the real world, her participation assuring her benefits, and her awareness of the game—in other words her capacity to distance herself—saving her from pathological alienation.

Subverting the social order in art

18 These Christmas day events described by Auggie indicate that Auster’s story, though it initially presents itself as a story about writing, is equally a story about reception and its aesthetics. And though Auggie’s story is self-avowedly about how he “received” the camera he uses every day, establishing, as we said, the explicit link between the

framing narrative and the framed narrative, and though his story is perceived by Paul as being about "a good deed"—making Granny Ethel happy by spending the day with her—it can also be read, as we have seen, as a staging of the literary reader. This staging in the framed narrative resonates with two epiphanic moments in the framing narrative, moments which can be seen as reactions to aesthetic experiences, making the link between the two narratives more complex than the mere camera.

19 When Michel Picard writes: "Literature is not an object, library, book, text, but an activity. This activity is not writing but primarily reading,"[15] he is consciously and militantly subverting the social order that places the writer above the reader, taking his cue from Jauss and Iser's "aesthetics of reception." In a similar way, Auster's story subverts the artist/spectator hierarchy. Paul, the revered writer, experiences two epiphanic moments in a paradoxical role reversal. The first occurs after viewing Auggie's photographs and the second after listening to his story.

20 The short story first establishes the narrator as the authoritative figure, the "distinguished person" (578) whose books have been reviewed, a figure of notoriety. On the other hand, the narrator presents a rather negative portrait of Auggie: "he works behind the counter of a cigar store," the narrator "didn't give much thought to Auggie" and Auggie only "*considered himself* to be an artist" (578, my emphasis), intimating that Auggie not only wrongly self-acclaims his talent (he is an amateur after all), but also erroneously envisions the possibility of considering photography as an art. Though the narrator would have preferred to "turn down" (578) Auggie's proposal to have him view his photographs, he accepts. A full page of the six-page story is devoted to this viewing session. As the narrator begins looking at the first of the "twelve identical black photo albums" (578), his first impression is one of bewilderment. "All the pictures were the same," he thinks, "a numbing onslaught of repetition, the same street and the same buildings over and over again, an unrelenting delirium of redundant images" (579). Auggie interrupts his page-turning and advises: " 'You're going too fast. You'll never get it if you don't slow down' " (579). The advice is heeded and the narrator "forced [himself] to go more deliberately": "I paid closer attention to details, took note of shifts in the weather, watched for the changing angles of light as the seasons advanced" (579). The narrator's epiphanic moment is then marked by the lexical field of revelation: "I was able to detect," "I began to recognize," "I realized," "I understood":

> Eventually, I was able to detect subtle differences: little by little, I began to recognize the faces of the people in the background, the passers-by on their way to work (579).

21 And finally:

> Auggie was photographing time, I realized, both natural time and human time, and he was doing it by planting himself in one tiny corner of the world and willing it to be his own (579).

22 The narrator realizes that Auggie is an artist and he realizes that in his taking one photograph a day at the same time and in the same place, Auggie is photographing time; in other words, the narrator perceives the symbolic value of the photographs, just as the young child observed by Freud was capable of symbolizing the departure and return of his mother by throwing and retrieving the reel, sublimating the painful absence. Paradoxically, Auggie, the potentially inferior cigar store worker, reader of book reviews and amateur photographer, was teaching the narrator, the writer, the artist, how to appreciate art. He was giving him a lesson in reception theory or even

reading as play: slow down, look closely, read carefully, not superficially—enter the world of art and use the proper tools to apprehend it. Indeed, Michel Picard devotes the fourth chapter of his essay to the "adult, more intellectual pole" of the player who uses rules that structure *play* into *games*. For the literary reader, these rules are in part those of discourse analysis: study of genre, tone, stylistic devices, tropes, etc. (163, 164). Paul eventually uses these rules as he "pays closer attention to details," "takes note of shifts," "watches for changing angles," "detects subtle differences" in the photographs viewed.

23 Though Delphine Letort astutely observes that the film adaptation of this scene centers on Paul's epiphanic discovery of his deceased wife in one of Auggie's photographs,[16] she concludes that the epiphanic moment is absent from the short story.[17] I would suggest that the film dispossesses Auggie of Paul's aesthetic response to his work, the epiphanic moment I have just analyzed, by displacing the epiphany to a real element of Paul's personal life. The strong emotion expressed by Paul in the film is provoked by the unexpected viewing of his wife (an emotion expressed both visually and, significantly, in Paul's possessive discourse: "That's Ellen. Look at *my* sweet darling" my emphasis), not by the viewing of the photographs. Auggie's exasperated look at the moment Paul is overcome with emotion is, I would suggest, an expression of Auggie's disappointment at having the epiphanic moment usurped, a usurpation which in the end, by focalizing on the author figure and *his* wife, re-establishes the social hierarchy that the short story subverts.

24 The second epiphanic moment comes after Auggie tells his Christmas story. It follows once again an aesthetic experience and is still the narrator's reaction to Auggie's art, not photography this time, but storytelling. After listening to Auggie's tale of "the lost wallet and the blind woman and the Christmas dinner," the narrator's initial response is one of total empathy for the lonely, aging blind woman and respect for Auggie: " 'It was a good deed, Auggie. It was a nice thing you did for her. [...] You made her happy. And the camera was stolen anyway [...] at least you've put [it] to good use' " (583). But then the narrator thinks twice and the reader notices again the lexical field of revelation: "it suddenly occurred to me," "I realized":

> I paused for a moment, studying Auggie as a wicked grin spread across his face. I couldn't be sure, but the look in his eyes at that moment was so mysterious, so fraught with the glow of some inner delight, that it suddenly occurred to me that he had made the whole thing up. I was about to ask him if he'd been putting me on, but then I realized he would never tell. I had been tricked into believing him (583).

25 Paul realizes that the story was not true... but maybe it was; Auggie would never tell! The narrator does say earlier in the short story, chronologically *after* his discussion with Auggie the day of the storytelling: "That was the subject of the story he told me, and I'm still struggling to make sense of it" (580), probably an indication that he is still puzzled about the veracity of the story. But the truth is, Paul has probably just been told "a pretty story" like the ones Auggie told Granny Ethel, "tricked into believing" not only because Auggie is an excellent storyteller skillfully creating illusion, but also because Paul has lost his critical distance. A lesson in reading is given once again by Auggie, this time the amateur storyteller whose arena is "a cramped and boisterous delicatessen with good pastrami sandwiches" (580), to the narrator, a professional storyteller published in the prestigious *New York Times*, constituting a second role reversal.[18] The lesson, given this time much more laconically—"Anything for art, eh Paul?" (583)—, is that fiction is not reality, but artful invention.

26 The two epiphanic moments stage two different postures of the receiver. In the first instance, Paul the spectator is reticent to enter the transitional space, to "play" with the photographs, "nodding his head in feigned appreciation" (579). In the second instance, Paul the listener plunges into the fantasy world to such an extent that he has lost his sense of reality, believing the story Auggie told him. In both instances Auggie guides Paul to assist him in adopting the posture of the literary reader, either by indicating to him the rules of the game (the tools to use to analyze) or by providing the *garde-fou* "Anything for art, eh, Paul?" which prevents him from alienating himself to the fantasy world.

27 This lesson of course extends then to the potential uncritical, non-literary reader of Paul Auster's short story who may also have an epiphanic moment, but only if he *realizes* he has been tricked by Paul Auster's use of strategies for reader participation into believing that this short story is non-fiction, that Paul Auster actually heard this story from the man at the cigar store and that he is the narrator/author who was commissioned to publish his story on Christmas Day in *The New York Times*.[19]

28 Auster further undermines the social order by proposing an inverted moral system in which lying and stealing are valued, something Auggie appears to question as he says to Paul: " 'I lied to her, and then I stole from her. I don't see how you can call that a good deed' " (583). The framed narrative, the framing narrative and the short story itself are all unconventional Christmas stories. Auggie's story is about Robert's stealing of the magazine, Auggie's stealing of the camera and Auggie's lying to Granny Ethel. But the end result is Granny Ethel's Christmas present: a wonderful day spent with a compassionate stranger. The narrator's story is about "stealing" a story from Auggie, but the result is the narrator has a story to publish. Finally the author lies to the reader, but the result is the author's literal Christmas gift to the readers of *The New York Times*. The gift is a good story to read and a lesson about art: the short story alerts the reader to the fiction in fiction, the dangers of literal, biographical interpretations. Art is not life, art transforms life, Michel Picard would say by proposing an "exceptional opportunity for the reader to playfully test reality," a vital undertaking.[20]

29 With Granny Ethel as a model, the reader has become aware of what fiction is—an aesthetic experience, not a reproduction of reality—and how it functions—by the reader's signing the reading contract and pseudo-believing in a lie. The literary reader is like Granny Ethel: she participates immensely, invests in the game, but only pretends to believe, maintaining her critical distance. Paradoxically, like a character from a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, Granny Ethel sees in spite of, or because of, her blindness. Indeed Granny Ethel would also have seen the significance of the final dialogue between the narrator and Auggie: " 'Did you ever go back to see [Granny Ethel]?' I asked. 'Once,' [Auggie] said. 'About three or four months later... *but Ethel wasn't there anymore*' " (my emphasis, 583). Unlike Paul, Granny Ethel would have understood that she was only an illusion, a figment of the imagination, and that once the story was over (Auggie says " 'And that's the end of the story' "), she no longer existed, or, as Shakespeare would have put it, she had "melted into air, into thin air."

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NOTES

1. My translation. Original text: “Tout texte postule une figure de lecteur” in Vincent Jouve, “Le lecteur dans le roman,” chapter *La poétique du roman* (103).

2. The “jeu” of the French title allows Picard to encompass both “play” and “games.” The distinction between them is dealt with in his essay and will be dealt with here, but the double meaning makes the translation of the title difficult. I have opted for “play” as it tends to be more encompassing.

3. It was only after *La Lecture comme Jeu* was published that Michel Picard presented a summary of his theory. He did so in the introduction to the essay *Lire le temps* published in 1989, three years after *La Lecture comme Jeu*. The excerpts presented here are my translations from that summary (7, 8). A diagram illustrating the theory can be found on page 154 of the same work. All other quotes of Picard in this article are from *La Lecture comme Jeu*.

4. “La nouvelle [‘Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story’] interroge le processus de création littéraire, qui se nourrit de l’expérience et du réel, dans un subtil jeu de rencontres et d’échanges entre l’écrivain (le narrateur) et le conteur/photographe (Auggie Wren)” (Paragraph 1).

5. Charles May, in the appendix to his essay *The Short Story: the Reality of Artifice*, notes a number of short stories that metafictionally foreground reading, for example: “The Balloon” by Donald Barthelme, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” by Arthur Conan Doyle or “Signs and Symbols” by Vladimir Nabokov (144-49).

6. In *Smoke*, Wang and Auster expanded the short story by multiplying the number of framed narratives (adding Rachid's, Ruby's, Cyrus', etc.), a choice that corroborates the interpretation of the story as metafictional.

7. See *Playing and Reality*. In Chapter 3 (entitled "L'illusion") of *La lecture comme Jeu*, Picard studies the concept of "aire transitionnelle." In his French translation of Winnicott's work, J-B Pontalis puns "jeu" (play) and "je" (self) to underline the close connection between the activity of playing and the building of the sense of self: "Du jeu au je" (quoted in Picard, 1986, 25).

8. In his didactic reformulating of Picard's reading theory, Vincent Jouve clearly presents the strategies used by authors to either encourage reader participation or on the contrary, encourage the reader to distance himself from the fiction (see the chapter entitled "Le lecteur dans le roman" of *La Poétique du roman*, 1997, 107-09).

9. Interview of Paul Auster in the TF1 Vidéo Edition of *Smoke*. *The New York Times*, a daily newspaper, is not to be confused with *The New Yorker*, a long-time magazine publisher of short stories.

10. Picard uses the word-play possible in French: "il n'y a pas de jeu dans le mécanisme."

11. Picard also uses the term "illusion ludique" in Chapter 3 when referring to literary illusion, both concepts based on the expression coined by Coleridge.

12. "I know, but still... "; I know the story is not true, but still, I want to believe it. As an illustration, Picard quotes a passage from Tolstoy's *Childhood*: "I myself knew that it was not only impossible to kill birds with a stick, but to shoot at all with such a weapon. Still, it was the game" (quoted in Picard, 1986, 114).

13. The non-player, says Picard, is one who "prefers not to" enter the "potential space," who remains on the sidelines so to speak, preferring for example non-fiction. He takes no risks, but receives no benefits.

14. Though neither Auggie nor Granny Ethel are *reading*, they are adopting the strategies of the literary reader described by Picard in a context of storytelling/listening that is similar to reading.

15. Beginning of the aforementioned summary of *La Lecture comme Jeu* published in *Lire le temps*, 1989, 7.

16. "La caméra zoome sur la silhouette de la défunte, avant de s'immobiliser et d'enfermer Paul dans la douleur d'une émotion indicible. Pour André Bazin, 'les virtualités esthétiques de la photographie résident dans la révélation du réel' (Bazin, 1958, 16), ce qui confère à la scène une valeur épiphanique" (Paragraph 20).

17. "l'instant épiphanique n'est [...] pas mentionné dans la nouvelle" (Paragraph 23).

18. For a study of the established hierarchy between oral and literate cultures, see *Orality and Literacy* by Walter Ong.

19. In the aforementioned interview of Paul Auster, Auster interestingly recounts the "story of the story," its ending drawing attention to the short story's fictional nature, though until that end, Auster (playfully?) recounts a story similar to the one contained in the short story: "It was a very odd request. No one has ever commissioned a story from me, a piece of fiction. [...] The idea of putting a piece of fiction in the *New York Times* was a thrilling challenge, but I had no ideas at all, so I moped around for a couple of days trying to think of something––I didn't have much time after all––and then just about when I was ready to give up, I looked down at my desk and there were my little Schimmelpenninck cigars in their tin, just sitting there, and I started thinking about the cigars *and little by little the wheels started to turn and I came up with that story*" (my emphasis).

20. The money stolen in the film is passed on from one character to the next, from The Creeper to Rachid to Auggie to Ruby to Felicity, probably a metaphor for the passing on of stories, to be underminingly considered just as *vital* as a bag full of bills.

ABSTRACTS

Michel Picard, in an interdisciplinary approach using existing research in the fields of psychology and anthropology, theorized the link between the literary reader and play in his essay *La Lecture comme jeu* published in 1986. His hypothesis is that reading is a specific form of play and like play has a function. Though Paul Auster, in spite of his spending several years in France, most probably had no contact with Picard’s essay, his story “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story,” published on December 25, 1990 in *The New York Times*, seems, uncannily, nearly an illustration of the theory of “Reading as Play” as both in its form and its content the story problematizes the dialectics of participation and distancing inherent in the literary reading process defined by Picard.

Michel Picard, dans une approche pluridisciplinaire s’appuyant sur les recherches en psychologie et en anthropologie, s’interroge sur le lien entre le lecteur littéraire et le jeu dans son essai *La Lecture comme Jeu* publié en 1986. Son hypothèse est que la lecture est une forme particulière de jeu et comme le jeu, a une fonction. Si Paul Auster, malgré son séjour prolongé en France, n’a probablement pas eu vent de cet essai, sa nouvelle « Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story », publiée le 25 décembre 1990 dans le *New York Times*, semble, étrangement, une quasi-illustration de la théorie de la lecture comme jeu. La nouvelle problématise la dialectique entre participation et distanciation inhérente à la lecture littéraire telle que définie par Picard.

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